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The Director of Central Intelligence

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National Intelligence Council

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : Harry C. Cochran
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SUBJECT : A Provocation Contingency in Lebanon:
Intensified Attacks on Marine Positions
To Force U.S. Air and Naval Strikes

1. The Administration's action on 13 September to deter further attacks on Marine positions and other U.S. facilities in Beirut by authorizing the Marines to use both local and offshore firepower to defend themselves, other MNF members, and the Lebanese armed forces could produce the opposite effect. The Syrians may perceive the action as an opportunity to provoke U.S. air and naval strikes against Druze and other Syrian-backed forces. President Assad and his Soviet advisers may gamble that sustained artillery and mortar attacks aimed at forcing the U.S. to escalate its military involvement will advance several key objectives:

a. Torpedo remaining prospects for a compromise agreement between the Gemayel government and its Druze and Moslem opponents on a ceasefire and political negotiations;

b. Strengthen the political impact of claims by Syria and its Lebanese clients that the U.S. presence is intended to maintain Maronite domination of an obsolete political order based on the 1943 National Covenant;

c. Forge a closer and more potent alliance among the Druze, Shia Amal, and Sunni Mourabitoun militias supported by pro-Syrian political parties and the Palestinians;

d. Stimulate a Congressional and public groundswell of demands for an immediate withdrawal of the Marines;

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e. Isolate the U.S. from Saudi Arabia and other moderate Arab states and alienate other MNF governments, particularly France. French officials have criticized Marine counterfire against Druze positions, claiming this identifies the U.S. too closely with Phalangist interests. President Mitterrand reportedly informed his cabinet in early September that France did not intend to become entangled in "the mesh of a civil war in Lebanon";

f. Establish a justification for greater Syrian and Palestinian military intervention on behalf of the "Lebanese people." A senior Syrian official warned on 13 September that if the U.S. "resorts to a serious military escalation... Syria could not but respond to such an escalation as it can never desert the Lebanese national forces." After the U.S. naval shelling of Syrian-controlled territory on 17 September, a Syrian military spokesman said Syria would strike back at American ships or Marine positions if fired upon again;

g. Capitalize on U.S. air and naval strikes as the justification for organizing a concerted Druze, Shia, and Palestinian attack on Beirut, supported by Syrian advisers, artillery and armor, with the objective of defeating the Lebanese Army, overthrowing the Gemayel government, and installing a Syrian-controlled regime based on the National Salvation Front formed last July.

2. The recent movements of Syrian long-range artillery and Palestinian forces into the Shuf mountains and of Shia Amal militiamen into two areas near Marine positions at the airport strongly suggest that the Syrians and their Lebanese allies are preparing for a major offensive in the next few weeks. Such an offensive might include:

a. Sustained, heavy shelling of Marine positions and other U.S. installations and key Lebanese targets such as the presidential palace, the Defense Ministry, and Christian East Beirut;

b. Coordinated Druze, Amal, and Mourabitoun ground attacks, stiffened by Palestinian fighters, aimed at shattering the Lebanese Army and occupying Beirut;

c. A simultaneous uprising against the Gemayel government by underground Moslem militias in West Beirut;

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d. Syrian air strikes against Phalangist and Army positions:

e. Attempts to hit U.S. naval vessels with Syrian long-range artillery, surface-to-surface missiles, or fighter-bombers;

f. Use of surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon and Syria against Lebanese, U.S., French, or British aircraft.

3. The Syrians and Soviets would have no illusions about the high risks and costs of such an offensive, but they may believe the potential benefits would far outweigh these liabilities. They may calculate that the Israeli pullback to the Awwali River, political confusion in Israel caused by Begin's resignation, controversy in Washington over invoking the War Powers Act, and a public opinion majority in the U.S. favoring withdrawal of the Marines have created a long-awaited opportunity to score a political-military breakthrough in Lebanon. The Syrians and their Soviet advisers may have persuaded themselves that they cannot afford to pass up a chance to inflict damaging defeats on U.S. and Israeli policies in Lebanon and to install a Moslem-dominated regime in Beirut under strong Syrian influence, if not outright control. In sum, Assad may believe the time is ripe for bold moves to establish irreversible Syrian hegemony throughout all of Lebanon north of Israel's security zone in the south.

4. The Soviets probably believe that events in Lebanon in the past three weeks have placed the Reagan Administration in a highly vulnerable position. They have three principal motives for encouraging Syria to proceed with actions to force Washington to escalate its military involvement:

a. Moscow shares Syria's perception of an opportunity to provoke American air and naval attacks on Druze and Moslem forces in the belief that this will not only provide a justification for a Syrian-backed offensive to destroy the Gemayel government and the Lebanese Army but will also cause heavy damage to U.S. relations with Arab and Moslem governments and to America's Middle East position generally;

b. In the aftermath of the Korean airliner shootdown, the Soviets are anxious to find a dramatic issue that will divert foreign attention, particularly in Western Europe, to alleged American overreaction and "atrocities" against helpless Lebanese civilians. Their aim will be to ignite emotional protests against the U.S. and a powerful wave of opposition in Europe to INF deployment. Moscow would expect that U.S. air and

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naval strikes in Lebanon would draw stern protests from other MNF governments, particularly France and Italy, that will divide the U.S. from its MNF partners on both policy in Lebanon and INF negotiations and deployment;

c. The Soviet leaders are looking for an opportunity to settle accounts with the Administration because of its perceived exploitation of the airliner incident to prosecute what the Soviets have described as a "major political provocation against the Soviet Union." Moscow's personal attacks on President Reagan far exceed the intensity of "normal" criticisms of American Presidents in the past decade. They suggest a virulent resolve to "punish" the President in ways that would damage his prospects for re-election next year.

5. In view of the confluence of a perceived opportunity to strike a heavy blow at U.S. policy and international prestige and of a powerful motivation to settle accounts over the Korean airliner shootdown, the Soviet leaders may well be tempted to accept risks in underwriting aggressive Syrian initiatives that will exceed their traditional cost-benefit calculus. The Soviets seem to be expecting a sharp intensification of the struggle in Lebanon. Soviet propaganda in the past week has begun to accuse the U.S. and Israel of preparing to "unleash a new war" in Lebanon and to charge that the Administration's announcement that the Marines are now authorized to call for naval and air strikes represents a major step in "escalating U.S. armed intervention."

6. If the Soviet leaders are in fact impelled by the kind of motives, calculations, and aims outlined in paragraph 4, they may be prepared to accept a considerably higher level of risk-taking than they have demonstrated in the past decade. If Syrian-instigated provocations result in U.S. air and naval reprisals against Lebanese targets, the Soviet Union will move rapidly to extract maximum political advantage from the inevitable international furor. It may threaten to deploy Soviet combat forces if necessary to protect Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians from American and Israeli "aggression." More significantly, the Soviets may be prepared to authorize the use of Soviet-controlled surface-to-air missiles in Lebanon and Syria against U.S. aircraft attacking Syrian or client military forces and facilities in Lebanon.

7. Soviet reactions to U.S. military escalation in Lebanon entailing higher than normal risk-taking probably would be based on an assumption that the Administration was operating under severe domestic and international constraints, and that U.S. naval and air strikes would precipitate such a clamor at home and abroad that Washington would be compelled to terminate them before they produced any decisive effects on the Lebanese power

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struggle. The high geopolitical stakes involved in this provocation scenario and Soviet and Syrian perceptions of the Administration's vulnerability to damaging domestic and foreign reactions could lead both regimes into dangerous miscalculations and actions that trigger an Israeli military intervention that would transform the situation abruptly and confront Moscow and Damascus with a highly divisive choice between risky escalation or humiliating retreat.



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